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ABSTRACT

Although portfolio evaluation is the key issue with which the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Missouri, Kansas City, currently struggles, the department has yet to develop a reliable quantitative method of assessing the portfolios. The department found itself ill-prepared to have the state immediately thrust it into new forms of assessment. The department's organizational communication course requires students to complete an employment portfolio project that emphasizes preparation of a professional portfolio. Students also have a professional in the field evaluate their portfolio. To aid in program evaluation, the department has students prepare program portfolios consisting of a minimum of three examples of their written work at various stages of the program, including the time of graduation. The department seeks evidence of student competence in such program objectives as writing skills, critical thinking skills, interpersonal communication, leadership skills, reading skills, research skills, cultural appreciation, knowledge of the field, and ethics. A few students are asked to provide a portfolio of all the work they do for all their courses during one semester. The department is developing a Cassette Disk Read Only Memory (CD ROM) computer mediated assessment for use in the Fall of 1995. Portfolios may not be the only answer to assessment, but they can be an excellent answer. (Contains 32 references. Appendixes present a petition to waive graduation requirement of a nationally normed test, and instructions and evaluation forms for the intercultural communication course portfolio assignment and the student program portfolio.) (RS)

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ED 373 376

Assessment in Specific Programs: Employment, Program, and Course Student Portfolios in Communication Studies

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A paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Summer Conference "Assessing College Student Competency in Speech Communication," Alexandria, VA, August 6, 1994.

Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to discuss the use of student portfolios in assessing communication studies, including course, employment, program, and curriculum student portfolios. Of particular concern is how to use portfolios in assessing communication performance.

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Assessment in Specific Programs: Employment, Program, and Course Student Portfolios in Communication Studies

Finding ways to effectively assess student learning is crucial in the field of communication (Backlund, 1989; Loacker, 1981; Hunt, 1990; Morreale, 1991). As part of a government mandated assessment process, necessity forced Missouri's public colleges and universities to early work in the assessment movement in speech communication (Aitken and Neer, 1991, 1992a, 1993a & b). In our department--while conducting our required major field assessment--we have discovered that assessment results are highly political (Aitken, 1993; Aitken & Neer 1992b). Through experimentation with a locally developed measure, nationally normed tests, portfolios, and other techniques, we found that student portfolios may be the best solution to give an informative and nonpolitical assessment of student competencies. The student portfolio lends itself well to the field of communication. The idea of portfolios is an old one. Artists, creative writers, and mass media professionals, for example, traditionally have been encouraged to prepare a portfolio. In our case, we simply have formalized the process for all our students.

Apparently, many institutions are finding portfolios useful. As Ory (1991) explained about one study: "one-third of the institutions reported collecting student portfolios while 85% reported using assessment results for program evaluation" (p. 451). Student portfolios are relatively common on the elementary and high school levels (Abruscato, 1993; DeSantis, 1993; Forseth, 1992; Gorrell, 1993), in assessing written communication (Brand, 1992; Dickson, 1993; LaPoint, 1992; Wauters, 1992; Winter & Winter, 1992), and are becoming accepted in a variety of contexts (e.g. Adams, 1992, Harrison, 1991; Jacobi, Astin, Ayala, 1987; Hutchings, 1990). One unique, and growing trend is to use student portfolios of self-acquired competencies to evaluate college credit for work outside of educational institutions (Dick, & Robinson, 1991; White, 1993). These varied purposes show the versatility of the portfolio technique. The use of portfolio assessment is on the rise because "clearly, people are finding something they need in portfolios" (Hutchings, 1990, p. 6).

For our department, the assessment process has been difficult. As part of a national movement among governors, our governor found higher education assessment to be a useful election issue. We were ill-prepared to have the state immediately thrust us into new forms of assessment. We were frustrated by the fact that politicians fail to recognize that faculty have assessed students and programs as long as higher education has existed in this country. When our faculty joined the current assessment movement with the real objective of improving our program, we quickly became disappointed by the political nature of the process. We failed to anticipate the competitive nature among faculty

different departments and schools that assessment would cause, the frustration over new assessment expectations with no funding for the process, and a sense of defeat by the mandates to change our methods with each new whim from higher levels. First we used a paper and pencil test, which we developed into a series of five tests which took up to two hours each. The major problems were the faculty commitment in developing the tests and the time these tests stole from class time that could be spent in instruction. In contrast, a portfolio, can include tests and other methods of evaluation already developed by faculty as important. And, with the student portfolio, we have a format designed to help the student improve skills which employ self- and other-assessment. Plus, when the politicians change their minds about the kind of information they want, with a portfolio, the wasted time and costs of test administration are avoided. When faculty are motivated to assess for the purpose of improved student learning, there is value in this constructive portfolio approach.

The political challenge for us was to obtain the information we needed to improve our programs, while still presenting a positive picture beyond the department. A crucial point about portfolios for faculty struggling with the politics of assessment is that "they are less subject to misuse than apparently simpler, single-score methods" (Hutchings, p. 8). While providing quality information, student portfolios emphasize the student's learning process, require self-evaluation that improves self-knowledge, increase self-esteem, and improve performance skills. The portfolio is more a part of student learning than program evaluation, and thus becomes a procedure faculty can value. Despite cost and reliability problems, portfolio assessment "promises the most benefits to instruction and the most valid measurement of higher order skills (White, 1991). We believe portfolio assessment gives students a high-level involvement when used at the course level, improved preparation for the job search process when used at the department level, and valuable insights into instruction when used at the course or curricular level.

What is A Student Portfolio?

A portfolio is a collection--file folder, binder, or box--of data about a student's progress over time. Such a file commonly contains examples of written assignments, but also may include such items as a resume, student self-evaluations of progress toward departmental goals, study behavior logs, class notes, advisor notes on the student's progress as obtained from interviews, a videotaped speech, an audiotaped interview, letters of reference, and test results. The true value of the portfolio is that the primary purpose of the portfolio is individual student learning. But, when used as part of the assessment progress, portfolios go beyond evaluation of the student to provide information for the evaluation of a program. Program evaluation may be conducted

by faculty, students, administrators, or external reviewers (community connections, consultants, accrediting associations). Because of the difficulty in using the entire faculty to analyze portfolios, the most common approach is use of a small faculty review committee to make recommendations to other faculty (Forrest, 1990). We find, however, that program assessment is a task piled on an already overburdened faculty, and therefore is only completed by the faculty members who are required to do so. For us, the evaluation part of the portfolio has been our weak link.

Faculty can collect a range of student portfolio materials from unsatisfactory to outstanding, so as to paint a broad picture about what is going on within the department. We do so in the course portfolios, but for these portfolios, we remove student names. For the student portfolio that does identify the student, content is the student's choice of "good" work to represent herself or himself.

Course Portfolios

The course portfolio--common in English instruction--is finding more widespread applications. Again, a key advantage is that this teaching tool can be used for state-mandated assessment. Gruber (1992), for example, reshaped a first year college composition course to use portfolios for instruction and meet state-mandated assessment requirements. A course portfolio is a student collection of multiple assignments together in a notebook to show learning and progress in a specific course. The student usually makes entries on a weekly basis and the instructor evaluates the portfolio at certain announced or unannounced intervals. Although they may use a different name, many interpersonal communication faculty already employ a portfolio method when they require journaling in their courses. The portfolio can provide a holistic approach to the course, allow students to keep track of their learning, encourage students to analyze their course progress, and help students make internal connections of assignments (see example, Appendix A). As Hutchings (1990, p. 7) explained, "unlike many methods, portfolios tell you not only where the student ends up but how she got there....They reveal learning over time." Although the course portfolio is particularly useful in writing-across-the-curriculum programs, portfolios are useful for managing, organizing, and keeping track of progress in any course.

Employment Portfolios

An employment portfolio is a collection of materials that a student collects to demonstrate skills to a prospective employer. In our department's organizational communication course, for example, students are required to complete a portfolio project that emphasizes preparation of a professional portfolio, then arrange an interview with a professional in the field who will analyze the portfolio's contents. The students then write a summary of what they learned (to include in the departmental portfolio).

Students are told to plan well in advance of the due date for this employment portfolio assignment. The purpose of this assignment is to demonstrate to the student the importance of communication competence--including listening, responding, writing, and questioning skills--in obtaining information and managing impressions. Each student selects and schedules an interview for a professional career employment interview or with a resource person and meets with that person at her or his corporate office. If the student decides to seek information rather than employment--as most do--the student finds out information important to academic and career needs and interests while the portfolio is analyzed by the professional. The student receives a realistic appraisal of preparation for prospective areas of employment. For the student's benefit, there is no better assessment process.

Students are told to construct two portfolios--one to keep and one to turn in to the professor (and department). For the portfolio that students show to the professionals (and keep), they usually use a professional looking black binder with plastic pages to hold their resume, references, a completed job application form and examples of their best work. The student takes this portfolio when she or he goes to the interview and asks for specific evaluation from the professional. The student puts a second copy of the employment portfolio in a file folder to file in the department. For Communication Studies majors, contents of each student's employment portfolio are added to the department portfolio already in place.

Because the department faculty wanted specific response to their student performance in the employment interviews--including portfolio contents--students are asked to write a summary of the professional's reactions. Students write a one page formal memo to the professor explaining with whom they interviewed, what they learned from the experience, and what the professional thought of the portfolio and the student's preparation for employment. Students are expected to send a thank-you letter to the person with whom they interviewed, and include in the portfolio a copy of the formal follow-up business letter thanking the individual for the interview (accepting or turning down the position, thanking her or him for feedback on the portfolio, seeking a follow-up interview, or whatever else is appropriate).

Students often act reluctant before doing the employment portfolio assignment, but then act appreciative of the experience in retrospect. The employment portfolio gives direct, pragmatic assessment of a student's performance to the student and indirect assessment from professionals to the faculty. The employment portfolio provides valuable town-gown interaction.

Program Portfolios

Recently, the Board of Trustees and state levels have expected us to use major field tests which are nationally normed. Threatening to tie funding levels to such test

results, we are obliged to respond with results from nationally-normed tests. There are some measures for mass and speech communication, but they fail to assess our specific program objectives. Because of the financial and time costs associated with testing, and the disheartening results when we tried to develop our own testing methods, we decided that we at least wanted our students to have something useful out of the nationally-normed test: a score to help in admission to a program of graduate or professional study. So, our pragmatic choice has little to do with our communication major (e.g. LSAT, MAT, GRE, or GMAT). We have arranged a prepayment system for the MAT with our guidance and testing center, which gives the test to students for us. With no consequence for a low score or refusal to take the test all together, we continue to be plagued with three kinds of problems: refusal to turn in test results some students are using for graduate applications, low student motivation to do well on the test for those who are not planning graduate student and subsequent low scores. The fallacy in using these tests for program assessment is obvious to educators, but the politicians seem satisfied. Basically, all we really know is that our graduates have the full gamut of possible scores.

To do the real work of program assessment, however, we needed a local, easy to use measure that could give us useful information about our students' accomplishments through our department. That measure has become the student program portfolio (see Appendix C). Students simply provide a minimum of three examples of their written work at various stages of the program, including the time of graduation. We tie the portfolio assignment to assignments in courses at the sophomore, junior, and senior level, so that a student can see progress throughout the program. We seek evidence of student competence in such program objectives as writing skills, critical thinking skills, interpersonal communication, language skills, leadership skills, reading skills, research skills, oral communication, cultural appreciation, decision-making skills, knowledge of the field, and ethics.

Students first prepare the portfolio in our cornerstone course (COMS 206) as part of course requirements. They have a form to complete and attach to the portfolio when they give the portfolio to the instructor in a file folder to be kept in the student's departmental file. A place on the major declaration form and graduation checklist requiring verification of the student portfolio is useful. We decided to make the portfolio content decision the student's choice. Because faculty cannot collect everything nor have room to keep it, students need to set priorities about the nature of the content. The two key problems with the approach is what faculty call "paperload" and difficulty in creating a rubric to evaluate the portfolio. We expect the computer-assisted approach we are developing will directly address these two problems.

Curricular Portfolios

We have asked a few students to provide us with a portfolio of all the work they do for all their courses during one semester. We pay students $20 for their effort in collecting materials and ask them to sign a release so that we can use the portfolio in program assessment. After copying the materials, we remove the student's name from the pages. We put the portfolio in a small file box with dividers to separate materials by course.

The students who provide the curricular portfolios were enrolled in at least one communication course at the time of the portfolio. Although the amount of material is massive, it gives the person assessing the portfolio a unique perspective. Most faculty know little about what happens in other courses. Faculty can actually see student notes, essays, papers, assignment, instructor comments, tests, and other materials completed in various courses across campus.

Conclusions

Because portfolio evaluation is the key issue with which our department currently struggles, we have yet to develop a reliable quantitative method of assessing the portfolios. At this point we are looking for ways to motivate faculty to participate in the assessment of portfolios through a written rubric (see Appendix D), in order to achieve reliability regarding agreement on a group of portfolios, consistent judgments over time, and agreement with external evaluators (e.g. Forrest, 1990, p. 12). For the moment, we can report to administrators that we conduct 100% assessment because the portfolios involve all majors in the department, and that statistic is important. As we collect a sample of nationally normed test scores for our students, we can say we compare to graduates around the country.

We still need to develop many aspects of our portfolio assessment process. We could use after graduation assessment more extensively. We have interviewed some graduates by telephone and surveyed some graduates by mail. The process of tracking down our graduates is a difficult one, however--which becomes more difficult the longer a student has graduated--so we have less than a 20% contact rate. By keeping portfolios over time, we may be able to track program development and effects of curricular changes. A system where students could send portfolio information for some years after graduation might be useful for looking at program success. "Such evidence might include descriptions of employment, job supervisor ratings, or reports of continuing education" (Forrest, 1990, p. 9). At this point we have been unable to work out the mechanics of such an arrangement.

Computerized Portfolios

We currently are developing a Cassette Disk Read Only Memory (CD ROM) computer mediated assessment for use in Fall, 1995. Some of the new applications of computer-mediated instruction in communication studies has potential for the assessment movement (Pathak & Beall, 1994; Cronin, in press).

The cassette disc (CD) will first be used in basic course assessment, then later for program assessment. The CD is designed to assist the student by providing extensive assessment measures, including a student portfolio. Students will be able save their work to floppy disk which can be given to the instructor or uploaded to a course or instructor file on an internal disc drive or mainframe. Approximately 75% of the CD content will be diagnostic assessment and 25% communication will be content delivery. Students may work on individual computers or in a college laboratory. We expect the CD to enhance our assessment ability by providing automatic statistical computations and computer file management. This computerized approach has excellent potential for making the portfolio a truly viable means of assessment of communication competencies. In addition, when a student asks a faculty member--a year or two later to write a letter of reference--the professor could pull up the student's computer file to examine visual and written matter.

We plan to continue the portfolio requirement at the graduate level by asking students to provide a portfolio with their applications for admission to our program, and later a portfolio check-off will be required at graduation. A graduate assistant could be used to tutor individual students to develop good portfolios.

Portfolios allow faculty control of the assessment process while offering educational advantages to students. According to Forrest (1990), "There is widespread intuitive belief among those interested in assessing general education that using portfolios might lead to better information about those programs. However, most colleges and universities have little knowledge about or experience in using such an approach (p. 1)." The faculty who review the portfolios may gain new ideas about assignments, teaching, and testing of other faculty that they may chose to incorporate in their own classroom. It opens dialog about student learning by showing concrete results.

Hutchings' (1990) warnings remain: "they're bulky, time-consuming, difficult to make neat sense of, maybe not what the legislature had in mind, and they are in an early unproven stage of development....But what's most at stake here are educational values. Choosing portfolios is choosing to enact--and communicate to students--a view of learning as involving, personal, connected, and ongoing" (p. 8). Portfolios may not be the only answer to assessment, but they can be an excellent answer.

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Appendix A
Intercultural Communication Course Portfolio Assignment

We will use a portfolio-method of learning and evaluation in this course. You will have a number of writing assignments that you should keep in a light-weight three-ring binder. This notebook of essays and course materials is the basis of 70% of your course grade. I plan to review your essay notebook 3-4 times. See the schedule for collection dates. Have the portfolio set up with the first essays for the first collection. Note that at the end of this syllabus is a form you are to keep at the beginning of each section. Those forms are designed to clarify the nature of the assignments for each section and to provide a log or summary for your progress. Use the form--not a separate sheet of paper--to provide a succinct summary of your weekly progress in the course. Using notebook dividers, indicate three sections to the course materials:

Section 1: Class Preparation and Participation

In this section you will keep track of how you prepare and participate in class. In pairs and in groups, you will be expected to work together in class in learning projects, work outside of class preparing for assignments. You should include summaries of your group assignments. You are expected to attend and contribute regularly to class sessions. Keep track of the preparation and in-class activities in this section. In the log, summarize the reading completed, time spent reading, class contributions, the most important concept learned from class, and an example of how your intercultural communication competency is improving.

Section 2: Observation-Interaction Hours

Keep track of your 16 observation-interaction hours with people of another culture. See the log at the end of the syllabus, which you should include in the beginning of this section, which includes your observation-interaction date, time, and purpose, the nature of your observation-interaction activity, and the most important thing you learned about intercultural communication that week. Also keep your four major essays relating to the observation-interaction assignments (International Student Interaction, Interview on Cultural Story in your Family , Day at Inner-city High School, Cultural Diversity Calendar Events, or Special Project in Intercultural Communication).

Section 3: Position Papers

You are to write position papers that help you (a) to understand who people are in the USA, and (b) to decide your personal position on key issues related to intercultural communication. These reactions are in response to the Culture Wars readings.

Appendix B

Intercultural Communication Course Portfolio Feedback

Date
1/25 3/29 4/12 4/15*
(*late)

For D grade:

__ __ __ __ Provided 3-hole, light-weight, inexpensive notebook, with papers hole-punched and in rings.

__ __ __ __ Dividers and example assignments in each of three sections: (1) log with class activities, (2) observation-interaction hours followed by essays, (3) position papers.

__ __ __ __ Titled and put name, date, assignment in upper-right corner of each typed assignment.

__ __ __ __ Used log summaries to begin each section.

For C Grade, also:

__ __ __ __ Used formal, clear, lively, and concise writing style.

__ __ __ __ Contained 75% assignments.

__ __ __ __ Essays had introduction, thesis, well-supported ideas, conclusion.

__ __ __ __ Needed more time, effort, consistency, and quality work.

For B Grade, also:

__ __ __ __ Contained 90% of assignments.

__ __ __ __ Showed thought and interpretation regarding readings and assignment.

For A Grade, also:

__ __ __ __ Portfolio showed creativity, critical thinking, new insights, learning, and progress in the course.

__ __ __ __ Used the English Writing Lab and had staff member sign one of your essays.

__ __ __ __ Contained all assignments.

__ __ __ __ Continued up-to-date, consistent, senior-level course quality work.

Special Problems with portfolio:

__ __ __ __ Need to use the English Writing Lab. Please take a recent essay, have them review it line-by-line, and have the staff member sign and date your paper regarding your meeting.

__ __ __ __ I cannot find all the materials due to date (assignments appear incomplete).

__ __ __ __ If you are seriously working on this essay notebook, please make an appointment to see me as soon as possible.

_/10 _/20 _/40 __ Tentative grade. Final grade for portfolio: _____/70

__ __ __ __ Instructor initials.

If you will be unable to attend a class when the portfolio is due, turn it in early or send it to class with a friend. Plan

your work so you are not trying to catch up a day or two prior to a due date, in case the unexpected happens.

*I will accept a late portfolio only once. A late portfolio--turned in within 24 hours of the due date--is automatically docked 5 points, **regardless of the reason**. *More than 24 hours late, and I will be unable to grade the portfolio until the late due date (April 15). Portfolios turned in on the late due date will automatically be docked 10 points (one letter grade in the course). If you cannot do work on schedule this semester, you may want to take this course a different semester.

Appendix C
Student Program Portfolio

As part of our state-mandated major field assessment methods, we are using student program portfolios. Each Communication Studies major should provide a portfolio at the time she or he declares the major and then update the portfolio prior to graduation. Most professors require a portfolio assignment in COMS 206, 344, and 483.

You need not write anything new for the portfolio, but should make copies of good work from coursework or other sources that you can place in a file folder. Please check off items you include and make sure each item contains your name and date. You are responsible for updating your portfolio. We recommend that you keep a professional portfolio for yourself so that you can show prospective employers. Place copies of your work in the department portfolio you turn in to the department secretary. Materials will be kept for approximately one year after graduation and will not be returned to you.

Student name:

I understand that my portfolio contents will be used in the assessment of the department of communication studies. Signature: _____
Current address:

Telephone number: (work)
(home)
Permanent address:

Contact person name, address, & phone (someone who will know your location several years from now):

Required items:
__ Three examples of your written work (see items below for suggestions).
__ Standardized examination scores (such as GRE, LSAT, GMAT, or MAT) or departmental waiver.
__ Knowledge checklist.

*****

Examples of work you might include:
__ An updated resume and cover letter.
__ Speech critique form completed by a former professor.

(continued on back)

__ Your professional goals upon graduation, 5 and 10 years later.
__ One written assignment from a sophomore, junior, and senior level course.
__ Written work from your employment or internship.
__ A research paper from the cornerstone (COMS 206), capstone course (COMS 483), or other upper level course.
__ An example of written work other than term papers (e.g. speech manuscript, newspaper article, advertisement, television script).
__ A well-written essay test.
__ An essay on your personal theory of communication.
__ An explanation of coursework completed outside the department.
__ A discussion of a valuable theory of communication.
__ Test from a course.
__ A letter of reference from an employment, internship, or other source.
__ Structured class activities.
__ A videoed speech, performance, or production.
__ A list of classical and contemporary fiction and nonfiction read in the last two years.
__ Photography examples.
__ Explanation of the five books most valuable in communication studies (and why).
__ A list of periodicals and magazines regularly read (and why).
__ Self-assessment of your mastery of the department program competency expectations.

Appendix D
Program Assessment by Student Portfolio

Student portfolio:
Rater name:
Date:
Student Level: __COMS 206; __COMS 344; __COMS 483; Other:

Please rank competencies according to the following categories:

3 (Comparable to grade of A) High quality
2 (Comparable to grade of B) Good quality
1 (Comparable to grade of C) Satisfactory quality
0 (Comparable to grade of F) Unsatisfactory quality
N/A (Insufficient evidence for evaluation)

Communication Studies Department Program Competency Expectations

__ Interpersonal Competency
__ Cultural Appreciation-Sensitivity Competency
__ Problem-Solving, Decision-Making Competency
__ Oral Communication Competency
__ Media Studies Competency
__ Public Speaking Competency
__ Ethical, Philosophical Competency
__ Written Communication Competency
__ Reading and Research Competency
__ Theory Competency

The Department of Communication Studies Program will be considered successful if it meets the following criteria:

1. A sample group of graduates have 100% competency ranking of category 1 or higher.
2. A sample group of graduates have 50% of competency rankings in category 2.
3. A sample group of graduates show an increase of competency rankings from the first rating (COMS 206) to final rankings (COMS 483).
4. A sample group of score from nationally normed tests will show an increase of 1% per year.

Appendix E
Petition to Waive Graduation Requirement of a Nationally Normed Test

As indicated in the UMKC college catalog and your program information, the state of Missouri requires major field assessment--Communication Studies in your case--of all graduating college seniors. Most departments use a paper and pencil test, some departments set a minimum test score for graduation, and some students are held up at graduation until they meet the testing requirements. In our department, you have several choices for the national test. The GRE or MAT are required for most graduate study in communication and related areas. The GMAT is required for programs in business. The LSAT is required for admission to law schools. To the extent funds are available, we reimburse students when receive their scores.

We recommend that you take the test which best fits your intended career or advanced study goals. If you will not pursue advanced education now or at a later time and want to be exempted from this requirement, you will need to receive department approval after completing this application. You need to turn in your program portfolio prior to submitting this application.

Student name:

Current address:

Telephone number: (work)
(home)

Permanent address:

Contact person name, address, & phone (someone who will know your location several years from now):

Overall GPA:___ Communication studies GPA:___
Number of hours completed in Communication Studies major at UMKC:___ Number of total hours completed at UMKC:___

*****

__ I have turned in my program portfolio to the department.

__ I do not expect to apply to UMKC or any other college for advanced study after graduation. Thus, I will not request letters of reference from faculty in the UMKC Department of Communication Studies for programs of advanced study.

__ I believe taking this test will not benefit me or the Department of Communication Studies because:

Student signature: Date: